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ABSTRACT

The overall illiteracy rate has been in sharp decline in Latin America, falling from 27.3 percent in 1970 to 17.3 percent in 1985. However, the total number of illiterate people has remained practically stable over the same period. Overall literacy rates tend to increase with the rurality of the population, the proportion of women, the absence of schooling, and the school failure rate of school-age children. Members of cultures that have an oral tradition have difficulties using written codes. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the main national and regional efforts to combat illiteracy have taken place in the 1980s as part of the Major Project in Education. The project's goals, strategies, and procedures were defined in 1981. The project strives to eradicate Latin American illiteracy before the end of the century and to develop educational services for adults. The countries that have developed national literacy campaigns include Argentina, Bolivia, Columbia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela. At its present rate, the project will be able to reduce the number of illiterate people in the region by only 6 million by the end of the century, leaving 37 million illiterate adults. The project has established the REDALF regional network for personnel training among sponsors and providers of adult education. (CML)

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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

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Latin America and the Caribbean: a major project for literacy

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by José Rivero,
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INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the main national and regional efforts to combat illiteracy have taken place in the current decade, as part of the Major Project in the Field of Education. Before looking at the strategies applied in pursuit of its goals, it is worth reviewing the principal features of illiteracy in the region.

In the first place we should draw attention to the difficulty of measuring the real dimension of the problem with any exactness. There are marked differences in the available statistical information, which makes it impossible to quantify the percentage and location of the illiterate population with any certainty, or what progress is being achieved with literacy. According to official figures, in 1985 there were 43.6 million adult illiterates in Latin America, a considerable proportion of whom were over 35 years old. While the trend in the overall illiteracy rate has been in sharp decline, falling from 27.3% in 1970 to 17.3% in 1985, the total number of illiterates has remained practically stable over the same period.

A second characteristic is the concentration of illiteracy in some countries and in certain types of population. This gives rise to a considerable disparity – close to 70% – between Latin American countries with the highest rates of illiteracy and those with the lowest, and between geographical areas within the same country. In most countries, overall rates tend to increase with the rurality of the populations, the proportion of women and with indigenous cultures. These constitute factors of imbalance in regional illiteracy rates, such as the high number of total illiterates in Brazil (estimated at 18 million in 1985), the high percentages of illiteracy among the indigenous populations of Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, and the considerable

rates of illiteracy in countries such as El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

WASTAGE AT SCHOOL

Thirdly, there is a close relationship between illiteracy with the absence of schooling and the so-called 'school failure' of school-age children. Thus, despite the fact that, owing to massive enrollment and the increasingly urban character of populations, there has been an extraordinary growth in the literate population (from 119 to 209 million between 1970 and 1985), out of 66 million school-age children in 1985, 8.5 million, or 13%, did not have access to schooling; to these may be added the high percentages of withdrawals, repeated classes and school failures which have persisted for many years. For instance, according to official figures, in twelve of the twenty-four countries studied not more than 70% of school children reach the final grade of primary education, and 10% abandon school between the first and second year of study, a figure which in some countries rises to over 30%. This 'school failure' phenomenon is directly linked, moreover, to problems of children learning to read and write.

A fourth characteristic is related to so-called 'functional illiteracy', which is the product just as much of ineffective literacy teaching among children as of adult literacy campaigns without sustained follow-up action, which leave large numbers of 'regressive' illiterates behind.

A MULTITUDE OF POPULATION GROUPS

Illiteracy in the region is also related to the traditional notion whereby illiterate populations are identified by the absence of writing and, in opposition to this, with the persisting influence of the spoken word in the region. This oral tradition is not only a heritage of unwritten indigenous cultures; it is also present in peasant and urban communities, where students are observed to have serious difficulties in using written codes. Cultural factors are particularly significant in connection with illiteracy among indigenous populations, whose languages and expressions are different from those of 'official' cultures and languages. The indigenous population is estimated at 30 million, subdivided into over 400 ethno-linguistic groups, ranging from tiny groups of a few dozen members to major groups of millions of persons.

THE DECLARATION OF MEXICO

The idea of a Major Project to tackle basic educational problems in Latin America and the Caribbean arose at a Regional Conference of Ministers of Education and Ministers responsible for Economic Planning, which was held in Mexico in December 1979. This meeting was organized jointly by Unesco, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) and the Organization of American States (OAS). The first Major Project sponsored by Unesco was implemented between 1957 and 1966, with the objective of expanding and improving primary education in Latin America.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

The socio-economic and educational context which preceded and motivated the Mexico meeting can be described as follows:

- The population of the region had undergone profound changes in its size, structure and geographical distribution, giving rise to social, economic and educational problems. The population of the region rose from 212 million in 1960 to 320 million in 1975. This sustained population growth made Latin America and the Caribbean a region with one of the highest population growths in the world.
- The non-oil exporting countries of the region suffered a drastic decline in their economic growth rate, which in 1975 was only 2.9%, so that the region's economies were shown to be highly vulnerable.
- The growth of education suffered serious imbalances, with regard both to opportunities of access

THE DECLARATION OF MEXICO

Based on the principles 'that no country can advance in its development any further than its education' and 'that being *and not* having *should take precedence in the design and orientation of countries' overall development policies', the Ministers of Education and Economic Planning of Latin America and the Caribbean decided to undertake a special effort over the next twenty years, by the end of which educational shortcomings and basic unsatisfied needs were to be overcome, while the children and adults of the region were to be guaranteed the right to better education.*

In order to carry out this ambitious plan, the Ministers asked Unesco to organize a Major Project, which by combining national, subregional and international efforts could turn the fine sentiments of the Declaration of Mexico into reality. This Latin American initiative was favourably received by the twenty-first General Conference of Unesco, held in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1980.

and to the quality of education offered to the different age, sex and social groups.

- In the 1970s, there had been clear confirmation of the close dependence of education systems on power structures and the fact that education constitutes one of the most effective means for the transmission and reproduction of a society's economic and social structures and its set of dominant rules and values.

However, one of the main results of the 1979 Regional Conference organized by Unesco with the CEPAL and the OAS was the Declaration of Mexico, a fundamental charter of the region's basic educational aspirations.

THE MAJOR EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

The project was assigned three specific main objectives as its central guidelines:

- *Provide schooling by 1999 for all school-age children and offer them general education for at least eight to ten years.*
- *Eradicate illiteracy by the end of the century, and develop and extend educational services for adults.*
- *Improve the quality and efficiency of education systems through the implementation of appropriate reforms.*

The goals, strategies and procedures of the Major Educational Project were defined at a regional intergovernmental meeting held at Quito, Ecuador, in April 1981.

The Quito meeting was particularly important, since it was an occasion for transforming the principles of the Declaration of Mexico into operational and concrete terms and for structuring the Major Project, with the last twenty years of this century as the horizon. Discussions covered two main areas: an attempt to examine most of the aspects identified as educational shortcomings and, as an alternative option, a more limited approach highlighting a few central aspects in the search for measures achieving impact and generalization.

Political commitment

There was a clear general understanding in Quito that the ambitious objectives of the new Major Educational Project for Latin America and the Caribbean could not be achieved unless the countries adopted them and incorporated them in their own educational policies. The success of the project demanded clear political decisions, which had to be taken in each country, based on recognition of the fact that the project would act as a catalyst for a renewed and sustained national and continental effort to effectively apply the basic primary right to education.

Nearly nine years after the beginning of this Major Educational Project, the extraordinary effort which the educational and institutional measures taken represented should be related in its framework and action to a number of factors by which it was affected.

One clear limiting factor was the seriousness of a structural economic crisis, described as the worse crisis to affect the region since the great depression of the 1930s. The distortion in the countries' economies produced by the high external debt, amounting to US $420,000 million, combined with the changes occurring in the world economy, had the direct effect of worsening poverty and its social and educational consequences in the region. Although no studies have been made to assess the social impact of the crisis, there are signs that regional public spending on education and social sectors has diminished considerably.

Two other important aspects to be considered in this period are the democratic advances in the region's countries, with extremely few remaining authoritarian military governments, and the dynamic social processes which the crisis itself has generated. There has been a big increase in small-scale, private initiative in the economy and an acceleration in social mobilization. In many cases these changes have exceeded the capacities and initiatives of government machinery.

All this has been forcing the countries to redefine their development goals, in order to resolve the problems of the external debt and those raised by an approach to development which favours democracy, equity and justice, as well as the processes of political democratization.

The educational measures taken by governments on their own are insufficient for democratic consolidation

and equitable socio-economic development; these imply complex processes, to which other non-governmental and popularly based agencies and institutions can and should contribute.

It should first be noted that, over the period considered, the project actually continued, despite the socio-economic context described above. The Member States have continually confirmed their interest and their commitment in relation to the goals and strategies of the project, despite the fact that in practically every case a different government has taken over from the one which initiated the project in 1981.

The regional meetings which ensued have constituted real landmarks in the construction of a long-term joint project. The Castries meeting (St. Lucia, 1982) created an Intergovernmental Regional Committee in charge of coordinating the project, generating national plans of action and establishing priorities and objectives for the development of a Regional Plan of Action.

This Intergovernmental Regional Committee organized three meetings (Mexico, 1984; Bogotá, 1987 and Guatemala, 1989). The first meeting (PROMEDLAC I) was aimed at a joint formulation of the basic components of the First Regional Plan of Action and to encourage the creation of regional cooperation networks as a basic strategy for implementing the project. The Bogotá meeting gave particular attention to the effects of the economic crisis, and highlighted priorities and strategies related to each of the three central goals. The recent PROMEDLAC III in Guatemala analysed the application of the first phase of the Regional Plan of Action, and set out objectives, strategic guidelines and priority areas for the Second Regional Plan of Action, covering the period 1990–1995. Another relevant aspect has been the profusion of national, sub-regional and regional workshops, seminars and training courses, which have provided the occasion for some 4,000 technicians and senior officials to analyse the

socio-educational situation and problems, and to discuss alternatives and strategies for resolving them.

Setting up the three regional cooperation networks helped to maximize this drive for personnel training. In effect, the basic aim of the REPLAD (regional network for training, innovation and research in the areas of the planning and administration of basic education and literacy programmes), PICPEMCE (regional network for the training and further training of educators) and REDALF (regional network for personnel training and specific aids for literacy and adult education programmes) has been to strengthen their component institutions and to raise the technical quality of the latter's key personnel. The fourth network to be set up was the SIRI (regional information system), responsible for the analysis and dissemination of statistical and documentary information.

The project has its own quarterly bulletin, which was initially intended to report on the main national and regional activities undertaken and which has now become a review, with selected analytical articles and proposals for educational innovation.

The entire history of literacy in Latin America has been troubled by wrong priorities and by traditional strategies in the form of circumstantial 'campaigns' producing no solid achievements or lasting educational effects; neither the idealism nor the dedication which inspired many of these initiatives was sufficient to attain the goals in the face of an obstinate reality.

The national literacy drives in Cuba (1960) and Nicaragua (1980), owing to their sheer scale, success and impact, are still always referred to as proof that national literacy is possible, subject to special socio-political circumstances of national transformation, with effects on literacy recipients and instructors which transcend education. The influence of these two experiences in the region expresses itself as a tendency to use them as target 'models', as well as a prejudice observed in some countries against recognizing their educational value. Both extremes of idealization and rejection, however, are founded more on ideological than on technical grounds.

By highlighting literacy as one of its three central objectives, the Major Educational Project expressly recognized the close relationship between literacy, critical poverty and incomplete political democratization, thereby calling attention to the wrong selection of priorities and reiterative strategies, and promoting recognition of the fact that it was worth supporting any national efforts which expressed a political will on the part of governments, even without being part of a process of general social change.

The operational strategy to deal with the second of the major project's objectives – to eradicate illiteracy before the end of the century and to develop services for adults – included an initial stage of information and reconsideration of the phenomenon of illiteracy, followed by the encouragement and promotion of national initiatives, linked to regional support actions (analysis and study meetings, surveys, publications), with a view eventually to generating national and regional cooperation networks, such as the REDALF, to which we shall refer below.

The action and initiatives of Unesco's Regional Office for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC) played a decisive role in this strategy. The Regional Centre for Adult Education and Functional Literacy in Latin America (CREFAL), based in Mexico, was the specialized organization which made particular contributions in terms of leadership training.

In October 1981, seventeen national delegations with a group of invited specialists held a regional seminar on national literacy strategies in Quito, Ecuador, with the purpose of analysing in depth the national literacy situations and the various aspects of literacy strategy which could be developed in the following decades. The publications produced by the meeting, which were circulated in the region, provided quite satisfactory guidelines to the basic options and key decisions to be taken in each country with regard to literacy strategies, from which different methods of coping with the problem were seen to emerge.

Plenty of significant experience in literacy has been accumulated since then and many national schemes have been launched with the aim of reducing and

improving existing illiteracy indices. The countries which have developed national literacy campaigns stimulated by the Major Educational Project include Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia (2), Chile, Ecuador (2), El Salvador, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

According to some optimistic forecasts and if no more decisive or comprehensive literacy measures are taken, the number of illiterates in the region would be reduced by the end of the century by a little over 6 million, leaving 37 million adult illiterates, which goes to show just how over-optimistic the countries themselves were in assigning targets under this Major Educational Project.

REDALF

The period from 1985 to 1989 was marked by the establishment and development of the REDALF Regional Network, made up of associated sponsoring institutions, representative of adult education in most countries of the region, and by regional sponsors (OREALC–Unesco and the CREFAL). It also includes second-level adult education organizations of the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean (Caribbean Council for Adult Education – CARCAE) and non-governmental Latin American organizations (Consejo de Educación de Adultos de América Latina – CEAAL). Its activities are organized on the basis of programming and evaluation mechanisms operating through regular technical consultations. The last of these, which was held in Cali, Colombia (March 1989), provided an occasion to assess the 1987–1988 operational plan and draw up an equivalent one for 1989–1990.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The progress achieved in terms of literacy with the support of the Major Project may be summarized by the following main points:

- *There is now a greater collective awareness regarding the importance of literacy for the democratization of education and society, and at the same time, there is greater recognition of the complexity of the problem of illiteracy.*
- *In connection with the above, special emphasis is being placed on the planning and evaluation of literacy programmes.*
- *The success of literacy is increasingly being related to support for a sustained effort of post-literacy and adult education, and in particular to a recognition of the need to overcome the so-called 'school failure' phenomenon by providing literacy and education for school-age children and allowing them to remain at school. The recognition of the link between illiteracy and poverty has encouraged a number of countries to give priority and special attention to illiteracy in population groups in a precarious educational situation. There has been a substantial increase in the number of bilingual educational projects for indigenous adults and children, with greater official recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity as values and assets which need preserving. A growing importance has also been given to illiteracy among women, especially among mothers. There are many programmes for young mothers and children which include literacy schemes, and much educational material in which woman is represented as the depository of culture and the mainstay of her children's education.*
- *In order to cope with the challenges inherent in the modernization of our societies, an effort is now being made to deal with the problem of functional illiteracy, which expresses itself as regression and limitations on understanding and fluency in the written language, and in the ability to calculate.*
- *There is a greater awareness of the value of regional co-operation in this field. The 'Compromise of Acapulco', signed by the representatives of the Group of Eight, expressly highlights the need to face literacy as a priority option (the Group of Eight, composed of the Presidents of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela, is at present the forum with the greatest political influence in the region). The establishment of co-operation networks has opened the way for many technical measures, studies and major publication schemes.*

OBSTACLES

Although highly significant, these achievements are not sufficient to attain the proposed goals. This paradoxical situation may be explained by the following main factors:

- *Requirements arising from external debt repayments have obliged a number of countries to adopt economic models which unload the burden of the solution onto the people; the resulting unemployment and/or underemployment forces the poorer strata to work as family units, which discourages schooling among children and the desire for literacy among adults. Further still, since the condition of illiterates is one of extreme poverty, economic disorder and social disorganization, it in fact prevents them from forming pressure groups to persuade society and governments to satisfy their educational and socio-economic requirements.*
- *The magnitude and complexity of illiteracy as a phenomenon of social backwardness, with all its underlying socio-cultural, economic, linguistic and territorial problems, have overwhelmed the present educational measures; these suffer from persistently poor organization of teaching and from inadequate support for literacy models and strategies, which are clearly inappropriate because they have not been viewed as a long-term undertaking.*
- *A significant shortcoming in the planning and assessment of literacy programmes is the lack of forecasting regarding post-literacy and changes and improvements in basic adult education. No provision is being made to incorporate the newly literate in the various formal and informal processes, or to offer facilities for further training and occupational instruction. This is related to the lack of adult education sub-systems, in which literacy is a component.*
- *Statistical inconsistencies induce errors of calculation and strategy. This is due not only to incomplete data concerning literacy, but also to inaccurate presentation of the results obtained, in that there is often a tendency to inflate them artificially, for instance by including among literates all those enrolled in literacy programmes. Both these situations are due rather to political pressures than to technical causes.*

CONCLUSION

The experience acquired so far clearly shows that the Major Educational Project constitutes a formidable challenge for Latin America and the Caribbean, and that the progress achieved has been more than praiseworthy, considering the persistence and, in many cases, worsening of the economic crisis described above. It also shows, however, that unless the present pace of educational measures is substantially increased, it will not be possible to reach the end of the century with a population which is both literate and incorporated in basic education.

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